

Review: Tinkering with History

Reviewed Work(s): *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction.* by Grant Wythoff, ed.

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past or from the future. With Sheldon's critical apparatus in mind, one might begin to appreciate the disjointed temporality of the film as one particular to motherhood—the hormonal and neurological changes of pregnancy alone can be disorienting and defamiliarizing. In the same way, the prospect of a human being growing inside of another human being, for someone who has not gone through such a process, might seem to be, ultimately, an alien experience. The film overlaps the effects of alien language and motherhood. They are inseparable. Banks's future cannot *not* be one where she makes a baby. As with the texts of Sheldon's analysis, *Arrival* presents the bind of reproductive futurity at one and the same time as it explores the temporal experience of motherhood.

*The Child to Come* breaks new ground by posing a political impasse and calling for alternative and, crucially, queer futures. In order for sf studies to take up this call, it must think the limit of reproductive futurism and beyond it to new horizons that are so much more than capitalist, so much more than human.—**Brent Ryan Bellamy, Memorial University of Newfoundland**

**Tinkering with History.** Grant Wythoff, ed. *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2016. xvi+ 359 pp. \$35.00 pbk.

Over the past two decades, digital tools have opened the science-fiction archive: smartphone cameras allow researchers to capture large amounts of information quickly and efficiently during their often limited visits to genre collections; scanners enable librarians to share rare sf resources online with a wide range of audiences; and databases such as the US Copyright Office's Catalog of Copyright Entries provide sf enthusiasts with a relatively easy way to determine who owns what artifacts. Not surprisingly, these tools have also engendered new histories of sf as a unique popular genre, including Justine Larbalestier's *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Wesleyan UP, 2002), John Cheng's *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2012), and my own co-edited volume, *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan UP, 2016). Now sf history buffs can add one more outstanding work to this list: Grant Wythoff's *The Perversity of Things*, which explores the history of founding sf editor Hugo Gernsback himself.

As Wythoff notes, *The Perversity of Things* is designed to provide readers with a fresh perspective on the origins of sf as one of the most important modes of storytelling in technoscientific modernity. Like other genre historians, Wythoff locates those origins in the writings of Hugo Gernsback, who published the first dedicated sf magazine, *Amazing Stories*, in 1926. Wythoff, however, does not treat the launch of *Amazing* as the starting point for modern sf. Instead, he proposes that

the project of science fiction as Gernsback understood it in fact had its origins in an earlier context: as a series of interlinking devices, debates, and visions shared by a community of tinkerers that formed around Gernsback's electrical supply shop and technology magazines.... Before it was a particular kind of story

or plot, science fiction was a way of thinking about and interacting with emerging media. (2-3)

Wythoff proves this claim admirably in the 50-plus information- and illustration-rich introductory pages that follow, restoring Gernsback to his rightful place in media history while illustrating how that history influenced the development of sf as a literary genre.

In doing so, Wythoff transforms some of the sf community's oldest stories about its origins. For example, while it has long been a truth universally acknowledged that Gernsback started his sf magazines to boost the sales of his radio import business, Wythoff argues that this particular myth derives in large part from later authors and editors who took seriously H.P. Lovecraft's "spectacularly racist" tendency to depict Gernsback as a "rat" and penny-pinching Jew (8). By way of contrast, a careful reading of the actual articles, editorials, and stories that Gernsback crafted for his technology magazines (and, later, his sf publications) illustrates that Gernsback was an energetic, likeable man who took seriously his role as a pioneer in the development of radio—and who was taken seriously by peers including Nikola Tesla, Henry Ford, and Thomas Edison. He was also a natural teacher who adapted standard magazine formats to best suit the needs of his evolving audience and who saw the products of technoscientific invention as the happy "occasion for a material education in the way things worked" (7). What emerges in *The Perversity of Things*, then, is the image of a man who embodied Progressive Era optimism and who saw no contradiction between economic success and social progress.

Perhaps most importantly, while scholars have long dismissed Gernsback's rules for good sf (which must teach readers something new about science and technology, use prophetic visions of the future to inspire technological innovation, and be presented in a story form that is 25% science and 75% romance) as "embarrassingly simplistic," Wythoff explains that Gernsback's preference for "writing that combined hard technical description with openness to the fantastic" first emerged in his technology magazines as a narrative means of coping with the reality that radio itself was still a prototypical phenomenon in the 1900s and 1910s (7). Indeed, the first fully assembled radio was not available for purchase until 1906 (significantly, Gernsback was the first person to sell such a device in the US), and radio was not even used to transmit voice until after World War I (64). Writing about radio for either advertising or instructional purposes blended seamlessly with future-oriented storytelling practices precisely because story filled the gap left by science, providing readers with a clear picture of this new communication technology's possibilities while inspiring them to participate in processes of tinkering and innovation themselves. As Gernsback himself noted, this was a highly successful project—so much so that he had to found several fiction publications, including *Amazing Stories*, to deal with the vast backlog of literary submissions he received from readers of his technology magazines.

But perhaps what makes *The Perversity of Things* most special is its design, which facilitates exploration of Gernsback as both scientific and literary pioneer. Wythoff presents his introductory remarks in a standard scholarly format, but

the majority of the book is devoted to reprinting key texts that Gernsback wrote between the debut of his first technology magazines in 1908 and the sale of *Amazing Stories* in 1930. True to the style of Gernsback's own magazines, Wythoff includes many useful and informative illustrations throughout the book, while also providing readers with scientific, biographical, and critical commentary in large, easy-to-read footnotes that are printed alongside each of the original texts. Significantly, Gernsback himself directly addressed the value of a similar magazine layout in his essay, "The New Science and Invention" (included in this book). Furthermore, as Wythoff explains in the opening section on "How to Use this Book," this design enables both chronological and thematic readings of Gernsback's oeuvre and indeed, Wythoff provides tables of contents for both types of readings as well.

Readers interested in Gernsback's literary career are most likely to enjoy reading the material collected here in chronological order. Wythoff makes browsing this way a pleasure, as he has carefully chosen an array of science articles, editorials, and stories from each of Gernsback's magazines to demonstrate just how the narrative strategies developed to explain incomplete processes of scientific development and innovation evolved into the constellation of thematic concerns and aesthetic practices that we now call sf—and how sf itself would eventually inform Gernsback's scientific speculation. For instance, the excerpt from Gernsback's hybrid utopia-space opera, *Ralph 124C 41+* (1911), first published serially in *Modern Electrics*, turns out to be heavily indebted to a series of editorials from that same magazine: the story's hero embodies the traits of the natural tinkerer as described in the 1911 editorial "The Born and the Mechanical Inventor"; he engages a system of mass-media communication much like the one envisioned in Gernsback's article "The Telephone and the Telephot" (1909); and the action of the section included here—in which Ralph uses wireless energy from his lab in New York to save a young Swiss woman from death by avalanche—is clearly a variation on a news incident that Gernsback relates in an unnamed editorial from that same year. Of course, ideas never travel in simple straight lines from science to fiction, and *Ralph 124C 41+* is no exception. As Wythoff explains in one of his many excellent footnotes, the "monograph" or thought-recorder that Ralph uses to get his ideas on paper is another "example of the porous boundaries between fiction and ... technological editorials," and one that Gernsback would go on to explore in much greater depth in the May 1919 issue of *Electrical Experimenter*. Given how thoroughly fact and fiction were tied together for Gernsback, it is little wonder that in his own review of Wythoff's book Bruce Sterling claims he will never look at his chosen genre the same way again—after all, it turns out to be a much more complex genre than it first appears.

Readers who want to learn more about Gernsback's role in media history may prefer to work their way through *The Perversity of Things* thematically. As Wythoff notes in his introduction, one of the most difficult tasks for media historians "has been attempting to devise a conceptual language for an object that is collectively imagined before the conditions of its material possibility" (43). Yet Gernsback was successful at doing just that with radio and, later,

television because he advocated hands-on experimentation as “a practice that provides us glimpses of the future” (44). Different thematic groupings of the essays allow readers to explore the various aspects of Gernsback’s media theory. For instance, essays in the “Wireless” grouping illustrate the editor’s pivotal role creating the first wireless communities; pieces in the “Tinkering” section reveal his ideas about the value of amateur experimentation; and writings featured in the “Scientifiction” section elaborate on one of the provocative ideas marking Gernsback’s career: that imagination is an important form of scientific tinkering that allows for innovation beyond the confines of the physical laboratory. While all these groupings were fascinating, my personal favorite was “Broadcast Regulation,” in which Gernsback calls for readers to lobby Congress about proposed radio regulations while advising them not to get upset before such proposals become law, because “we have noted in the past [when we wrote about radio regulation that] there was almost a panic among the amateurs,” and such panic undermines sensible political action (91, 108). Given that many of his ideas about amateur radio and radio regulation were indeed incorporated into bills such as the Radio Act of 1912, it seems we should add “public policy expert” to Gernsback’s list of scientific and social accomplishments.

While Wythoff encourages us to take one of two paths through *The Perversity of Things*, ambitious readers will find a number of other provocative ways to use his book. For instance, Wythoff’s extensive footnoted discussion of other scholars who have looked at Gernsback in terms of gender and genre might invite us to read the works featured here in a similar manner, noting how over time Gernsback shifts from addressing the “young men of this country” to addressing “the average man [and his] mother ... wife [and] children,” to addressing “the average man and woman” (70, 275, 273); see also the accompanying illustrations to note a similar change in visual representations of those who engage new communication technologies. Other routes through *The Perversity of Things* might include an examination of Gernsback’s editorial persona in the context of the editorial practices of his time; Gernsback’s scientific journalism as it relates to the rise of modern reporting techniques; the impact of race and nationality on Gernsback’s thinking about science and futurity (both in terms of the racism leveled at him as a Jew and in terms of his own tendency to self-identify as a Luxembourgian -American rather than as an immigrant of German descent); and even the role of new media in disabled people’s lives (see the thematic grouping of essays about “Sound” for a particularly fascinating set of discussions about this issue).

If I have one complaint about *The Perversity of Things*, it is that I did not want it to end—or, at least, I wanted more. How did Gernsback’s thinking about media and sf continue to develop after 1930? Why could not a visionary like Gernsback profit from his own ideas? To what extent were members of the early sf community themselves aware of Gernsback’s role in media history? Given, as Whythoff persuasively demonstrates, that Gernsback anticipated both what we now call “maker communities” and the scientific and social issues that those communities grapple with today, why has his work not been more thoroughly acknowledged by digital and other media scholars who are in the process of

constructing their own histories? Of course, it is impossible for one author and one book to do it all, and the fact that I am asking these questions leads me to suspect that Wythoff is every bit as clever an editor as the man he studies. Rather than simply telling us what to think, Wythoff provides just enough information about Hugo Gernsback that we do indeed learn quite a bit about him—and, in the process, realize that there is still much more work for all of us to do. In essence, then, Wythoff invites his audience members to become engaged critical readers who contribute to the development of sf and media history through our own intellectual tinkering and innovation. I cannot help but think that Gernsback would be proud. Highly recommended.—**Lisa Yaszek, Georgia Tech University**

**Herstory, Redux.** Lisa Yaszek and Patrick B. Sharp, eds. *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, EARLY CLASSICS OF SCIENCE FICTION, 2016. xxv + 393 pp. \$90.00 hc, \$29.95 pbk, \$23.99 ebook.

*Sisters of Tomorrow* is co-winner of this year's Susan Koppelman Award for the Best Anthology, Multi-Authored, or Edited Book in Feminist Studies given by the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. It joins a distinguished if small list of anthologies that have aimed to preserve, celebrate, and cement women's contributions to early sf. This period, from the late 1920s to the 1940s, is crucial not just because of its formative impact on the genre as it developed in the Anglophone world, but also because of the ephemerality of its primary sources—the crumbling and rare pages of the early pulp magazines themselves. As feminist sf critics and fans have noted, the early history of women's writing in the genre is particularly vulnerable as, with a few exceptions such as C.L. Moore, they were much less likely than male authors to have their short fiction collected in the years following the decline of the magazine market and the rise of the paperback. Without access to special collections of sf archives, the majority of women's writing from this period is, effectively, invisible. Such erasure of women's work is what *Sisters of Tomorrow* aims to prevent through its careful selection and reprinting of fiction and non-fiction work by women involved in the classic sf era of the US pulp magazines.

Yaszek and Sharp situate the anthology as “part of the ongoing project to recover the history of women's contributions to SF in all their forms” (xxii-xxiii). Recognizing the critical work of feminist sf scholars, as well as of anthologists such as Pamela Sargent and Justine Larbalestier, their project not only updates and expands previous work, but also does an excellent job of re-contextualizing this work for a new generation of scholars and readers. The anthology collects not just fiction but also other prose and non-fiction work that looks to a broader range of sources than professional magazines such as *Amazing Stories*, including amateur publications. It is separated into five sections, each dealing with a different role: Authors, Poets, Journalists, Editors, and Artists. Each of these “chapters” is prefaced by a critical commentary that introduces and contextualizes the following stories or excerpts in terms of their